Smoke & Mirrors

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Smoke & Mirrors

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Summary

They’ve made it to the Institute but not everything is as it seems.

Notes

Third installment to this AU. Once again you’ve no need to know the Fallout games, although this has some minor spoilers for the main quest if you haven’t finished it yet.

See the end of the work for more notes

The crackle of electricity was followed by a bright white light. The *zap* was almost deafening in his ears and Will blinked as he looked upon his new surroundings.

Whereas he had froze in shock, Hannibal reacted instantly. His silenced pistol made a dull sound as he killed the two technicians staring at them in surprise. After all, they were not the people expected to beam into the Institute.

Will breathed out in disbelief. "We actually made it here… It worked!" He was looking at Hannibal with bright eyes and the man couldn't help but smile back.

"It appears that way."

The Railroad had managed to decode the Courser chip and used the codes therein to create a device to intercept the transmissions from the Institute. All they had to do was wait for them to attempt and beam personnel back, hijacking the signal and being the ones transported instead. Given their current location inside the teleportation room, it apparently had worked just as intended.

"Now where?" Will wondered aloud, looking at the bank of computers with curiosity. Everything around them was white and spotless, filled with tech of all kinds. Will rolled the chair away that had one of the dead technicians in it, smearing the blood on the screen as he tried to clear it. Ignoring the mess, Will tried to pull up maps or anything of use on the terminal.

"It appears as though the elevator is the only way out of here," Hannibal observed. "It's locked down."

"Probably a security measure. If anything would ever get in that wasn't supposed to…"

Hannibal nodded his agreement, watching Will's fingers fly over the keys with ease. "Can you override it?"

Will's brows drew together. "Not sure from here…" Hannibal hummed, walking off to check the terminal on the wall. "Ah, here we are. A layout of the complex. And it's…" He blinked, looking over his shoulder at Hannibal in surprise. "It's huge."

At that moment, the elevator rose to their level, doors opening. Hannibal smirked back at him, a brow cocked.

Shaking his head, Will turned back to the computer. Hannibal was hopeless when it came to his silent bragging at his *technical prowess*. Will was far from helpless with computers but Hannibal made it look like a walk in the park.

Pulling the plug from the side of his Pip Boy, Will slotted it into the terminal port. "Lemme download these real quick."

"Any idea where to start looking?" Hannibal inquired, standing then behind his shoulder to look at the map.

Will sighed dejectedly. “It’s so big Hannibal. I’ve no idea.”

“Here,” Hannibal pointed out. “There’s higher security. If they are holding anyone…”

“How do we bypass it though?” Will returned the cable to his Pip Boy before Hannibal took hold of his wrist. He brought the map up, using the touchscreen to manipulate the angles, zooming in and out as he searched.

“We have to use this main elevator,” Hannibal spoke. “That’s a given.” He rotated the map to show Will the levels of the facility. “We can take it all the way down to the bottom. There appears to be a service tunnel there. And there’s a smaller elevator… here.”

“We can access that to take us up behind the security,” Will followed, nodding his head. “Alright. Sounds like as good a plan as any.”

What Will wasn’t expecting was the view. As the lift cleared the initial bunker-like layer, he realized that the whole elevator was clear, allowing them a panoramic view of the Institute as they descended. “Holy shit.” To say it was vast was an understatement, a sort of beauty to the bright architecture that reminded Will of things before the war. “This is incredible.”

“Quite the sight,” Hannibal agreed.

They watched the people moving about their daily lives. The elevator was clearly a central shaft of the complex, everything radiating off from there. There was even moving water and gardens at the ‘ground’ level, with bright artificial light that could have passed for sun’s rays.

After that however they passed through another thick layer of concrete, stopping in the maintenance tunnels. Compared to the vaulted ceiling and open space of the above levels, the tunnel was tighter, lit with low light. “We might run into synths down here,” Hannibal mentioned reasonably as he checked that the coast was clear. “Shouldn’t be any security though.”

Will drew his handgun all the same, noting that Hannibal had never put his away.

They did encounter a few Gen 3’s and Will felt a bit guilty for having to put them down. It wasn’t like the earlier models. Those were nothing more than fancier versions of the robots Will had known pre-war. The Gen 3’s more than *looked* human he had come to learn. They had the free will of one too.

The second elevator was smaller, pressing them together in the confining space. Will looked up to meet Hannibal’s gaze. “Thanks. For being here with me,” Will managed.

Hannibal gave him one of those little smiles. “For you Will? I believe I would do just about anything.” His fingers combed through Will’s curls, that smile growing into something more warm, genuine.

They hadn’t really talked about the kiss that day. They certainly hadn’t done anything about it, despite the fact they clearly both knew what the other wanted. Will needed to stay focused

on Abigail however, not wanting to forget his goal. Now that Abigail was in reach, he didn't see a reason to keep pushing Hannibal away.

That time it was Will that initiated it. He tilted his head back, pressing chapped lips to Hannibal's. "When this is over…" he whispered against Hannibal's mouth. There was no need to finish.

The elevator stopped, letting them off into a small hallway that led them to the fortified area they had found on the map. It turned out to be a series of holding cells, clear plexiglass showing an array of people. Holstering his weapon, Will's eyes darted about in search of one person in particular. Will practically felt his heart stop when he saw her. "Abigail!"

He dashed up to the glass, laying his hands on it. The teenage girl inside was shocked to see him. "Dad?!"

"It's me," he practically sobbed, smiling back at her. He looked back to where Hannibal was coaxing a terminal to life. "Cell 8!" Hannibal offered him a slight smile and nod before getting to work. "Don't worry Abigail. We'll have you out in no time."

Just like that, he heard the locks click open and the door slid out of the way. Abigail flew out of the cell and straight into his arms, bawling onto his shoulder. "Dad! You came! I knew you'd find me!"

"I've got you," he assured, cupping the back of her head while the other wrapped around her waist. "It's okay."

At the approaching footsteps, the pair looked up at Hannibal. "Doctor Lecter?" Abigail voiced her surprise. "You said you'd never come back."

Will's eyes went wide, looking from his adoptive daughter to Hannibal. "You're one of them?... You knew where she was this whole time and you never told me! You lied to me!"

Hannibal tutted. "I never lied Will. I merely kept my full association with the Institute a secret."

Will growled, putting Abigail behind him. "*Why?*" he demanded.

Hannibal didn't answer. Rather he turned away and started for the door. "I'm sorry Will," he mentioned, pausing to look over his shoulder. "I really am."

Will's brows dropped. Then he saw it; the small canister rolling towards him. Eyes widening, he looked up at Hannibal just as it exploded into a cloud of smoke and bright light.

* * *

Will felt as though he were drowning, lights murky and fuzzy as he opened his eyes. His hearing was muffled too.

Still he believed he could make out Hannibal's voice, that one of the silhouettes in the distance was him. There was another man there, and as Will drifted with consciousness he

made out snippets of what was said.

“As promised Frederick.”

“...not as damaged by the wastes… far from ideal.”

“...still serves the purpose.”

“Right you are Doctor Lecter.”

Will’s stomach roiled and he fought off the darkness as best he could.

“Welcome back to the Institute,” the stranger continued.

Will lost his battle then, slipping back into the peaceful black.

* * *

“Will… Will! I need you to wake up.” The voice pulling him from his haze was familiar. “Come on. We have to go,” it urged again, adding a little shake.

“Wha-?” Will blinked away the sluggishness of unnatural sleep, finding Hannibal bent over him. “You bastard!” It drained his energy instantly but he lashed out with a fist. It was only too bad it didn’t connect, Hannibal catching it easily.

“You have every right to be mad at me,” Hannibal stated, “but now is not the time. We need to get you out of here.” He encouraged Will to sit up, steadying him as he went. It turned out that Will had been put into one of the holding cells where they had found Abigail.

“Abi-”

“She’s waiting for us in the transport room,” Hannibal assured. “We need to get there.”

As Hannibal was helping him to his feet, Will finally noticed the alarms and flashing strobes. “What’s going on?”

“My payment to Doctor Bloom,” Hannibal answered dryly.

Will’s brows pulled together in confusion. Any kind of further thought on the topic would have to wait however because his head hurt. “How long was I out?”

“Only a few days.” Hannibal steered him into the elevator. It appeared as though they were back-tracing their original route. “I apologize for my methods. However there was no other way to insure your safety and retrieve Abigail.”

Will nodded his head but found that to be a bad idea when he swayed. “What the hell was in that thing?”

“A gas grenade designed to temporarily incapacitate. After that, Director Chilton had you under sedation until he decided exactly what he wanted to do with you. I can assure you

most of his ideas on the matter were… unpleasant."

"Director?" The elevator stopped and when they exited Will found they were not in the service tunnel but a large, brightly lit hall.

"The head of the Institute. Doctor Chilton was in charge of the Robotics Division when I left."

Will frowned, leaning more into Hannibal's hold as he stumbled. "So you really were with them," he murmured.

"I promise to explain everything to you Will. But first we need to leave."

Will nodded, allowing Hannibal to lead him through the twists and turns. Most people were too busy to pay them any mind. They were all running around trying to evacuate, while security synths and the Coursers were fighting off intruders that were wearing Railroad armor. Hannibal put a few of the security down on their way by, but never slowed in his desire to get out.

"Wait a moment," he ordered, pressing Will against a wall before peering out to the central chamber. There was gunfire echoing around them, and Will noted with morbid fascination the blood that was trickling through the flowing water underneath the clear flooring at his feet.

Hannibal tapped at the Pip Boy on his arm, Will finally noticing that his was gone. "You took my Pip Boy too?"

"Frederick wasn't about to let you keep it. I decided to keep it safe for you." Seemingly satisfied, Hannibal added, "There we are. Come on."

He hooked his arm with Will's, gun held in his other hand as he rushed them towards the elevator. Hannibal had managed to time it so the doors opened just before they reached them, allowing them to shelter there from the firefight. Once the elevator was moving, Hannibal proceeded to remove the Pip Boy and wrap the device back on Will's arm before locking it on.

"Thanks," Will murmured, rotating his forearm a bit and feeling the added weight. It wasn't the most comfortable of technology however it was something he'd grown used to. At the very least it was useful, so he wasn't about to just chuck it away.

The elevator opened to the transport room, finding two doctors there in lab coats accented with green sleeves. "Doctor Lecter," one greeted, the other still tapping away at the computer. "The last group was just beamed out."

"Good. Set the coordinates to the detonation site. After we're out, then you get yourselves and any remaining agents to the rendezvous. *Thorn* will be meeting you there with a team."

The guy nodded before looking at Will and back to Hannibal. There was obviously a question there but he didn't ask. Instead it was the second man after he finished putting in

commands. "Jimmy Price," he introduced. "This is Brian Zeller. Bioscience."

"Not anymore," Zeller muttered.

Price looked over at him a moment before sighing in resignation. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Gentlemen?" Hannibal raised a brow. They both cut the chatter.

"Where's Abigail?" Will demanded, having already scanned the room for her.

Zeller pointed behind him and Will turned to find her hidden in the shadows by the elevator. "Dad."

"Abigail." He gave a laugh half disbelief, half relief. He held her a long moment before Hannibal urged them gently into leaving.

"Good luck," Price offered before the tingling sensation of the transporter surrounded Will, followed by the *zap* and bright light.

* * *

They were sitting on the roof of a tall building that was somehow still standing after all this time. Will's legs were dangling over the edge, Hannibal tentatively sitting beside him. "That… that was a surprise." Will was watching the massive dust cloud rolling over the smaller buildings. He could only imagine the crater that the CIT building now was, the Institute built into the ground beneath.

"Not so much given who helped us to get inside," Hannibal replied dryly, glancing over his shoulder to where Alana and Abigail were speaking. Matthew was there as well and Hannibal had to hold back the scoff.

"I get why it needed to be done," Will said, "but blowing the nuclear reactor? How much radiation have you brought down on this whole area now?"

"Because of how deep underground the Institute was, most of that radiation will have been contained. Some of it likely has come out with the debris, but beyond the blast zone there shouldn't be an increase in rad levels." He paused a moment. "It's only an educated estimate, however it seemed worth the risk."

Will didn't know how to respond to that. Instead he reminded, "I believe you were supposed to explain how you used to live down there and why you lied to me."

"I did not lie," Hannibal insisted. Will shot him a reproachful look. "It is true that I used to be a member of the Institute. I was born there. I thought I would die there."

"So what happened?" Will prompted when the man hesitated.

"I became jaded with the notion of their perfect world. The world they wanted to create wasn't just improbable, it was impossible. So I decided to leave. I left Bioscience and

started training with the SRB."

"SRB?"

"Synth Retention Bureau. A division with both human and synth assets whose main purpose was to retrieve any escaped synths and to monitor the Commonwealth."

"Spies."

"Precisely. Most importantly though, they were the only humans to be allowed *outside* the Institute." Hannibal looked out at the horizon and the settling cloud. "I trained with them, worked up here to learn my way around, and when I was ready I killed the Courser I was with and disappeared into the Commonwealth. I always knew there was a chance that they would send Coursers after me, but I didn't care."

"Well that explains why you knew how to get into the Institute. But how'd you know Alana?"

"Having a common enemy meant we undoubtedly crossed paths. She always wanted me to join them but I wasn't about to give the Institute more of a reason to send Coursers for me. Besides, I am not particularly sympathetic to their cause."

Will wanted to ask but decided it could wait for another time. It wasn't as though he knew what to fully make of synths yet himself in order to have an opinion.

"So Alana's deal you mentioned… it was to blow the reactor?"

"In part. I was to get in and alert her inside agents that they were to launch a final purge."

"Price and Zeller," Will guessed.

"They had been the ones smuggling out synths for the last decade at least. Before them, I can't say who it was. Alana wanted them to send as many synths through as possible, all of the ones who wanted out. While that was happening, I was to plant the charges."

"So it's over?"

Hannibal shook his head. "They'll be SRB and Coursers to mop up, and there might be backlash from the scientists who managed to evacuate in time. In any event, they will have their hands full collecting up all the synths that made it and helping them be on their way."

"They won't stay in the Commonwealth?"

"Safer for them not to. A lot apparently go to the Capital Wasteland where no one has even heard of the Institute and this kind of technology. Here, people are still scared of what they are."

"Makes sense."

They sat in silence for a bit before Hannibal offered, “I also found out something I think you would like to know.” Will looked over at him. “The man that led the team to kidnap Abigail. His name is Francis Dolarhyde. He’s a mercenary the Institute liked to employee for… covert jobs. Jobs they didn’t want to be tied to. He’s known in mercenary circles as The Red Dragon.”

“Where can we find him?” Will’s face was set in grim determination.

“I will have to talk to some contacts about it.” He met Will’s gaze. “We’ll find him Will.” The promise of this *Dragon*’s death hung unsaid in the air between them.

“You still want to help me?”

“Of course I do.” Hannibal’s face softened, hand cupping Will’s cheek. “The affection I’ve shown for you was genuine Will. I want you to stay with me.” He glanced over at Abigail. “The both of you.”

Will smiled, hand covering Hannibal’s. “I’d like that.” Hannibal’s lips turned up briefly before he withdrew his hand and looked away. “What is it?”

“There is… a final thing you have to know. However I’m unsure how you will take it.”

“What?”

It was a full minute before Hannibal began, “Chilton was interested in keeping you around because you offered something… unique. You were in a Vault when the bombs dropped. A perfect genetic specimen to study that was virtually untouched by radiation.”

“What about people like you? That were born underground?”

Hannibal lifted a shoulder. “One could argue our genetic makeup has still been tainted by the radiation the founders had been exposed to. Also there’s the bit about experimenting on your own people…”

“That’s why they wanted Abigail?”

Hannibal nodded. “She was protected in the Vault. And before you ask, why her and not yourself or one of the others, well that’s quite simple. She was the youngest there. The ideal candidate.” Will frowned, thinking over everything he’d been told when Hannibal’s next words floored him. “It was her tissue and the studies they performed that helped create the Gen 3’s.”

“What?”

“As I was told, Abigail became something of a mother figure to the synths. She spent most of her time with them, living out her days in the Institute.”

“What are you-?” Will furrowed his brows. “You’re not making sense.”

“Abigail is dead.” Will felt his heart stop. “She was dead before I was even born. What you see there?” Hannibal nodded towards the young girl that stood laughing with Alana. “That’s a synth.” Will’s head snapped around to face Hannibal. “She was programmed at Abigail’s request to have her memories, her personality. That synth believes she’s Abigail. It was why she greeted you as her father.”

Will couldn’t believe it. She moved, talked, and acted just like his adopted daughter. “Does… does she know she’s a synth?”

Hannibal raised a shoulder. “I’m not sure. I never asked.” He paused before admitting, “She’s not the first from the Institute to insert themselves into a synth platform. Some others did so as well. All of them are treated simply as one of us, even while the other Gen 3’s are little more than hardware, servants.”

“But she was in a cell,” Will reasoned, trying to wrap his head around everything.

“My doing again I’m afraid. It was all apart of the plan to fool Chilton into believing I was still one of them.”

“She recognized you. You knew her from before. Surely she’s realized she hasn’t aged yet.”

“Perhaps she does know, or suspect, she’s a synth. Or a trick of code has made her blind to it. I can’t say.”

Will gave a little huffing laugh. “Well at least it makes sense now why you believed my story when we first met.”

Hannibal nodded. “The mention of Abigail and a Vault… It wasn’t likely to be a coincidence.”

“Wait, if this mercenary took Abigail… How is he still alive?”

“Cybernetic implants mostly. A one-of-a-kind experiment of the Robotics Division. It was while developing the Gen 3’s. The thought was to put robotics into a human, merging a human consciousness with a machine’s program. It had… less than ideal results. So the project was scrapped. However they still used the asset they created. Due to his now half-robotic nature, he has lived long past that of a normal human.”

“I can’t even begin to comment on any of this.” Will rubbed his palms into his eye sockets, feeling the impending headache. “This is all…”

“It’s alright Will. Give it time to process and if you still have questions then I’ll try my best to answer them.” Hannibal sounded so sincere and Will looked up at him again. Hannibal was watching Abigail as he said, “I suppose the only real question left is, can you still love her knowing what she is.”

Will didn’t even hesitate when he answered, “I’ll always love her. And synth or not, she’s real enough to me.”

Hannibal’s smile was tight and brief. Will didn’t expect his opinion on synths to change overnight, or because of Will, but he appreciated the fact Hannibal was clearly willing to try in order to make Will happy.

He reached out, taking Hannibal’s hand and smiling when he looked at Will. “Let's go home.”

Hannibal’s smile was genuine then, leaning in to press their lips together. “As you say beloved.”

/End

End Notes

A final part to the series coming soon.

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